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Citation for final published version:

Cardinale, Alison 2017. Book Review - Martin Priestman, The poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened spaces, romantic times (Ashgate, 2013). Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780-1840 (22) , pp. 151-153. 10.18573/j.2017.10167 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10167>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10167>>

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# ROMANTIC TEXTUALITIES

LITERATURE AND PRINT CULTURE, 1780–1840



ISSN 1748-0116



ISSUE 22



SPRING 2017



◆ SPECIAL ISSUE : FOUR NATIONS FICTION BY WOMEN, 1789–1830 ◆

[www.romtext.org.uk](http://www.romtext.org.uk)

◆ CARDIFF UNIVERSITY PRESS ◆

***Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840*, 22 (Spring 2017)**

Available online at <[www.romtext.org.uk/](http://www.romtext.org.uk/)>; archive of record at  
<<https://publications.cardiffuniversitypress.org/index.php/RomText>>.

**Journal DOI:** 10.18573/ISSN.1748-0116 ♦ **Issue DOI:** 10.18573/n.2017.10148

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**Aims and Scope:** Formerly *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* (1997–2005), *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780–1840* is an online journal that is committed to foregrounding innovative Romantic-studies research into bibliography, book history, intertextuality and textual studies. To this end, we publish material in a number of formats: among them, peer-reviewed articles, reports on individual/group research projects, bibliographical checklists and biographical profiles of overlooked Romantic writers. *Romantic Textualities* also carries reviews of books that reflect the growing academic interest in the fields of book history, print culture, intertextuality and cultural materialism, as they relate to Romantic studies.



the radical trope of the alternative community on one hand and the recuperated and adjusted conservative narrative of history as science on the other' (p. 183).

Price convincingly concludes that 'chivalry allowed for the relationship between property, wealth and political power to be re-examined' (p. 208). By calling into question 'the association between property and power' (p. 209), the early British historical novel recasts the stages of chivalry from their aristocratic associations to consider commercial ones: sentiment and the materialities of history alike must be redistributed and redirected from the nation to the individual as a means of attaining and preserving liberty.

*Reinventing Liberty* engages with so many primary texts that Price's discussion cannot delve deeply into each work; the textual analyses she provides are relatively cursory, remaining, for the most part, at the level of the novels' plots and general themes. But, since Price's aim is to provide a panorama of and justification for the late-eighteenth-century historical novel genre and its emergence from the economic and political environment of this period in Britain, this cursory approach is effective and useful. By wading through a wide range of works—rather than diving into a select few—Price is able to establish a broader foundation for future studies in the early British historical novel. I finished reading this work energised and with scores of ideas dancing through my mind for approaches to future research on the primary works with which Price engages—and ready to debate the Brexit vote through the lens of cultural history. In sum, the work's merit lies less in literary criticism and more in the cogent contextualisation of eighteenth-century philosophies on display in the stories told about Britain's national identity. 

Ruth Knezevich

University of Otago

<<https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10166>>

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Date of acceptance: 5 September 2016.



Martin Priestman, *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 324pp. ISBN 978-1-4724-1954-5; £70 (hb).

*THE POETRY OF ERASMUS DARWIN: ENLIGHTENED SPACES, ROMANTIC TIMES* aims to recover the poetry and poetics of Erasmus Darwin from behind the rock of Wordsworthian Romanticism by challenging anew its assumptions about poetic diction and the role of metaphor or analogy. Priestman is working against the grain of 'the Romantic Movement, with Erasmus Darwin's absurd efforts the prime specimen of the artificial lumber of "poetic diction" mercifully cleared away

for good by Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* and its Preface' (p. 3). While I disagree with Priestman that Wordsworth's reconceptualised 'poetic diction' engenders 'easy assumptions' about artificial ornamentation—rather, it remains a hard-won innovation in the development of English poetry—it is easy to be persuaded by Priestman's argument that the poetry of Erasmus Darwin has been given short shrift to the degree that his more famous grandson could declare that, in his own time, the poetry was barely read.


As Priestman's enquiry proceeds, however, its ambitious scope becomes more evident and a paradox emerges in relation to his aim of recovering the poetics while at the same time giving due attention to Darwin's use of myth in the context of a Foucauldian epistemic shift from a static Linnaean taxonomy to an early, dynamic evolutionary model. Similarly, Priestman's outline of Darwin's theories of mythology, while pertinent to the project of recovering neglected aspects of the three major poems under discussion, extends into a detailed yet somewhat distracting narrative exploring those fascinating secret societies, the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons. Priestman's lively and informed treatment of these contextual phenomena is so interesting that the reader may be apt to lose sight of the focus on poetics and poetry, *per se*. Ironically, Darwin's poems recede slightly into the background at these stages of the work (Chapters 6 through to 8) despite the worthy objective of providing a fresh treatment of *The Loves of the Plants*, *The Economy of Vegetation* and *The Temple of Nature*.

Chapter 11, 'Romantic Times (1): Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth', ought to be of particular interest to Romanticism scholars, with its nuanced and astute reading of Coleridge's complex relationship to Erasmus Darwin. That relationship is more frequently elided or treated reductively through the brief decontextualised quotation of Coleridge's sometimes damning views of Darwin's poetics. Priestman, on the other hand, is alive to the complexity of tone in Coleridge's letters and applies judicious interpretative attention to the links between the purpose and the recipients of the letters in question before making any assertions about Coleridge's assessment of Erasmus Darwin's poetry.

The genuine strength of Priestman's study of the poetics of Erasmus Darwin is his exploration of a distinctively spatial orientation to the poetry, an 'Enlightenment spatialism' that can be obscured if the poetry itself is evaluated using a Romanticist lens that prioritises time, or 'spots of time', over spatial arrangement. While conceding that Coleridge needs more empty spaces than Darwin provides for the kind of contemplation that recognises genuine pathos, Priestman presses home his point that a writer's poetics ought to be evaluated on its own terms. Such evaluation rightly entails using the aesthetic principles of a poet's precisely historicised context, regardless of whether these principles have been disparaged by Romanticists, then and since. At the very least, it is of legitimate concern that the principles of Erasmus Darwin's poetry are simply ignored by post-Enlightenment readers steeped in the legacy of Romanticism.

Priestman carefully considers the role that Darwin's poetry played in contemporary debates about female education, offering a particularly interesting survey of

the legacy of his poetics as it was taken up and transformed by women. In Chapter 12, 'Romantic Times (2): Later Romantics and Women Poets', Priestman considers women writing poetry influenced by Darwin's didacticism but with an eye to the domestic aspect of flowers and life. Such poetry takes on a less sexual but equally intriguing re-interpretation of 'vegetable love'. Priestman is alert to the problematic category of 'Romantic women writers' and sensitively applies an historicised understanding of the stages of life of the women discussed and their contextual experiences, particularly Anna Laetitia Barbauld (as a poet born in the 1740s).

Overall, the work is clearly and cogently written and fills a gap in the existing literature on the literary aspects of the polymath that was Erasmus Darwin, while simultaneously pointing the way towards further enquiry into his more often obscured role as a 'man of letters'. Priestman succeeds in salvaging the reputation of Erasmus Darwin as the writer of *The Loves of the Plants* from the dismissive satire, *The Loves of the Triangles*, which rendered him a poetic absurdity and buried his poetry as the object of serious study for so long. Re-reading *The Loves of the Plants*, in particular, is a heightened experience as a result of Priestman's effectiveness in opening up fresh ways of discussing the poetry of Erasmus Darwin. Ultimately, Coleridge's observation that Darwin displayed the 'most original mind in Europe' informs Priestman's analysis of Darwin's self-conscious textuality and 'magpie intertextuality' (p. 67). *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times* is a provocative study of a poetic thinker worthy of recovery in light of our current theoretical concerns and abiding appreciation of English poetry. 

Alison Cardinale

University of Sydney

<<https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10167>>

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Date of acceptance: 30 March 2016.



Mark Sandy, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 188pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-0593-1; £60 (hb).

MARK SANDY'S LATEST MONOGRAPH, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning*, builds upon his previous work on Romantic subjectivities, legacies and constructions of place. This study unites these previous interests in an exploration of how the language of grief in Romantic poetry is used to articulate the connection between a personal sense of loss and the subject's position within social and literary communities. At the same time, Sandy challenges definitions of 'Romanticism', and demonstrates how writers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



**Jane Aaron** is Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of South Wales. Her publications include *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (1991), *Pur fel y Dur: Y Gymraes yn Llên Menywod y Bedwaredd Ganrifar Bymtheg* (Pure as steel: The Welshwoman in nineteenth-century women's writing, 1998), *Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing in Wales* (2007), *Welsh Gothic* (2013), and the co-edited volumes, *Out of the Margins: Women's Studies in the Nineties* (1991), *Our Sisters' Land: The Changing Identities of Women in Wales* (1994), *Postcolonial Wales* (2005) and *Gendering Border Studies* (2010). She is also the general editor of Honno Press's English-language *Welsh Women's Classics* series.

**David Buchanan** is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta and an Instructor in the Centre for Humanities at Athabasca University, Canada.

**Alison Cardinale** is the Assistant Head of Learning and Curriculum English at MLC School where she teaches the International Baccalaureate alongside senior English courses. Alison is commencing the third year of research for a PhD at the University of Sydney in 2015, focusing on the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge under the supervision of Professor Will Christie. Recently, Alison has worked as an undergraduate English tutor at the University of Sydney and has ten years' experience teaching English in independent Sydney secondary schools.

**James Castell** is a Lecturer in English Literature at Cardiff University, where he teaches courses on Romantic and twentieth-century poetry and poetics. He has articles on Wordsworth in *The Oxford Handbook to William Wordsworth* and *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, and is currently completing a monograph on Wordsworth and animal life.

**Mary Chadwick** is an Associate Research Fellow in the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Huddersfield where she worked on *The Anne Clifford Project*. Mary's research interests include women's writing, manuscript cultures, book history and Welsh writing in English from the very long eighteenth century.

**Koenraad Claes** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Ghent University (Belgium), where he is employed on the three-year individual research project *Narratives of Continuity: Form and Function of the British Conservative Novel in the Long Nineteenth*

*Century*, funded by the Research Foundation, Flanders (FWO). Before that, he was a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Associate on the project *The Lady's Magazine: Understanding the Emergence of a Genre*, led by Prof. Jennie Batchelor at the University of Kent. His first monograph, a history of the late-Victorian little magazine, is under contract with Edinburgh University Press. He is the managing editor of the open-access journal *Authorship* <[www.authorship.ugent.be](http://www.authorship.ugent.be)>.

**Mary-Ann Constantine** is Reader at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. She works on Welsh and British literature of the long eighteenth century and has also written on travel writing, folk song, authenticity debates and the Romantic movement in Brittany. Her book on the Welsh stonemason poet Edward Williams, *The Truth against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery*, appeared in 2007. With Dafydd Johnston, she is general editor of the multivolume *Wales and the French Revolution* series. She is currently leading an AHRC-funded research project, *Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant and the Welsh and Scottish Tour 1760–1820*.

**Richard De Ritter** is a lecturer at the University of Leeds and the author of *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820: Well-Regulated Minds*.

**Diane Duffy** was awarded a PhD from the University of Manchester in 2011 on the subject of history, gender and identity in the writings of Anna Eliza Bray (1790–1883). She has presented a number of conference papers on how Bray's regional romances, set in the south-west of England, might be viewed as instrumental in shaping a sense of English national identity in the form of an English national tale. She is currently working as a researcher at the Elizabeth Gaskell House in Manchester.

**Elizabeth Edwards** is a Research Fellow at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth. Her publications include *English-Language Poetry from Wales 1789–1806* (University of Wales Press, 2013) and *Richard Llwyd: Beaumaris Bay and Other Poems* (Trent Editions, 2016). She is currently working on a monograph on Wales and women's writing in the period 1789–1830.

**Ruth Knezevich** is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand) where she is working on a Marsden-funded project on the nineteenth-century Porter family—novelists Jane and Anna Maria Porter and their brother, the artist and traveller Robert Ker Porter. She received her PhD in 2015 from the University of Missouri for her research on footnotes in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century literary works; she continues this research with a distant reading of the footnote in women's writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.



**Jakub Lipski** is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Kazimierz Wielki University, Bydgoszcz, Poland. Before obtaining his PhD in English literature, he studied English, Art History and Cultural Studies. He is the author of *In Quest of the Self: Masquerade and Travel in the Eighteenth-Century Novel—Fielding, Smollett, Sterne* (2014) and co-editor (with Jacek Mydla) of *The Enchantress of Words, Sounds and Images: Anniversary Essays on Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823)* (2015). He is currently working on a monograph on the correspondences between the eighteenth-century English novel and the fine arts.

**Nicola Lloyd** is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Bath Spa University. She specializes in fiction of the Romantic period, with a particular focus on the Irish national tale and the interactions between Romanticism and Enlightenment. Her doctoral thesis, which she is currently preparing for publication, considered the influence of Enlightenment discourses of moral philosophy and perception on Romantic-period fiction. Nicky has published articles on the Irish novelist Lady Morgan and is one of the authors of *The Palgrave History Gothic Publishing: The Business of Gothic Fiction, 1764–1835*, due for completion in 2017. She is currently preparing a scholarly edition of Mary Julia Young's gothic–national tale *Donalda; or, the Witches of Glenshiel* (1805).

**Andrew McInnes** is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Edge Hill University. He has recently published his first monograph, *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period* (Routledge, 2016). His research interests include women's writing of the long eighteenth century, the geographies of gothic fiction and children's literature.

**Amy Prendergast** is currently based in the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. She completed her doctoral studies there in 2012 after being awarded a four-year PRTL Government of Ireland scholarship. She was subsequently the recipient of an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship, which allowed her to work on her first monograph. This work, *Literary Salons across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century*, is forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan.

**Corrina Radioff** is studying for a PhD at the University of Liverpool on the history and function of pre-chapter epigraphs in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. She manages the social media pages for *Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe and his Contemporaries* and maintains a personal blog, *The Age of Oddities: Reading the Eighteenth Century* <<http://ageofoddities.blogspot.co.uk>>, to encourage readers of all tastes and backgrounds to enjoy the delights of eighteenth-century literature. She has written for the *Johnsonian Newsletter* and the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies *Criticks* website.

**Joanna E. Taylor** is Research Associate in Geospatial Innovation in the Digital Humanities at the University of Lancaster. She recently completed her PhD at

Keele University: her thesis, entitled 'Writing spaces: the Coleridge Family's Interactive Poetics 1798–1898', explored the use of poetic spaces in negotiating influence anxieties in the works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's children and grandchildren. She is the Cartography Curator for the *Gravestone Project* and is the Editorial Assistant for the *Byron Journal*. She can be found on Twitter @JoTayl0r0.

**Yi-Cheng Weng** is Adjunct Assistant Professor at National Tsing Hua University. She is also teaching as adjunct lecturer at National Taiwan University, National Chengchi University and National Taiwan University of Arts. Her PhD, entitled 'Conservative Women: Revolution and the British Novel, 1789–1815', was awarded by King's College London in 2016. She has written articles on women's writing, treating topics including the private and public spheres, anti-Jacobin novels, conservative women writers and femininity, and the history of the novel.

**Jane Wessel** is an Assistant Professor of British Drama at Austin Peay State University. She has published articles in *Theatre Survey* and *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700* and is currently working on a book project on literary property and dramatic authorship in eighteenth-century England. She tweets about theatre history, pedagogy and eighteenth-century culture @Jane\_D\_Wessel.

